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U.S. Is Preparing Its Policies With a New Kremlin Leader in Mind

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WASHINGTON, Oct. 24 — The Reagan Administration has begun preparing policies toward the Soviet Union that are based on the assumption that there will be an early change in the Kremlin leadership and that it is important that the next Soviet leader have a clear idea of American views, Administration officials say.

Several officials involved in dealing with the Soviet Union said in interviews in recent days that there was a consensus among American intelligence officials that Leonid I. Brezhnev, the Soviet leader for the last 18 years, was in such poor health that he was likely to be replaced soon. But there is no agreement on when this might occur, or who would succeed him, officials said.

Mr. Brezhnev, who will be 76 years old in December, is believed to have been in poor health for years, particularly in the last four years, when his public appearances have decreased drastically.

"Within the C.I.A. and the State Department, different experts have different candidates," one official said, "but the old Soviet hands don't rule anybody out, even somebody nobody has touted."

Shultz Receives Briefings

Secretary of State George P. Shultz has received briefings on the Kremlin leadership situation but has come away from them convinced that it makes no sense to pin American plans on any one Soviet figure emerging as Mr. Brezhnev's successor.

Reporters were told last week that before Mr. Shultz's recent two meetings with Foreign Minister Andrei A. Gromyko in New York, it was agreed by Mr. Shultz and President Reagan that those sessions not be used to try to advance new Soviet-American agreements, but rather to send, in effect, a transcript of American views on relations with the Soviet Union to the new Soviet leadership, whatever it might be.

As a result, during the seven and a half hours of talks, Mr. Shultz deliberately spoke at great length on virtually every issue between the two countries. The American expectation was that Mr. Gromyko's staff would send a full transcript of the exchange to the Soviet Politburo, from which the next Soviet leader is expected to emerge.

As part of the belief that Moscow is on the verge of a change, American officials also expect no dramatic shifts in Moscow's policies. One official pointed out that during Mr. Shultz's meetings

with Mr. Gromyko, neither side raised the possibility of a meeting between Mr. Reagan and Mr. Brezhnev.

A State Department official said that Soviet diplomats had told their American counterparts that Mr. Brezhnev only worked about two days a week and that it was impossible for him to assume the burdens of such a meeting. Since Washington assumes that Mr. Brezhnev will be replaced, there was no particular desire, the official said, to have a meeting.

This was the overriding message conveyed to the Soviet Union, reporters were told, in the Shultz-Gromyko meetings:

"We are strong. We are going to stay strong. We are going to develop our strength. We have strong alliances, and we can take care of our interests, and you better believe it. And if you want a conflict-ridden situation in that context, you have a formidable adversary. It doesn't have to be that way, but that's the way it is right now, and if you want to change, let's see some evidence in behavior."

Among the possible "evidence" that the Americans have suggested would be the release from prison of dissidents, such as Anatoly B. Shcharansky, or a rise in emigration, an easing of martial law in Poland, an agreement on the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan, or a Soviet willingness to press for an agreement on the withdrawal of Vietnamese troops from Cambodia.

Unique Opportunity for U.S.

What is unique about the situation, officials said, is that this is the first time in Soviet-American relations that a change in the leadership is evident and American officials have time to think about it.

Stalin died without warning in 1953 and his eventual successor, Nikita S. Khrushchev, was ousted by his colleagues in 1964, with Mr. Brezhnev initially sharing the leadership with Aleksei N. Kosygin, the Government leader, and Nikolai V. Podgorny, the nominal chief of state. Mr. Brezhnev took over Mr. Podgorny's duties, adding them to his leadership of the Communist Party, in 1977, and Mr. Kosygin faded even before his death.

For a long time the experts expected Andrei A. Kirilenko, who is 76, to replace Mr. Brezhnev. But lately, officials said, there have been plausible rumors in Moscow that he is very ill or otherwise out of the political race. His signature was missing from an obituary signed by the rest of the Politburo on Oct. 5 and this started a flurry of new rumors.

Speculation has also centered on Yuri V. Andropov, former head of the secret police, but he has not been seen publicly since the end of August, officials said. The most prominent contender, at the moment, officials seemed to agree, is Konstantin U. Chernenko, a longtime Brezhnev protégé. Another official favored by some experts is Viktor V. Grishin, the head of the Moscow Communist Party committee since 1967, who has had long economic experience, particularly in the trade union field.